



This Is
How It
Happened

She's gotten mad, now it's time to get even.

JO
BARRETT

A+

AUTHOR
INSIGHTS,
EXTRAS, &
MORE

this is how

it happened

(not a love story)

JO BARRETT



HarperCollins e-books

For my mother, Mary Ann

An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy

—from the Spanish proverb

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And the Oscar goes to...

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Sir, if you were my husband, I'd poison your drink.

—LADY ASTOR *to* WINSTON CHURCHILL

Madame, if you were my wife, I would drink it.

—*His reply*

Chapter 1

I never intended to KILL him kill him. I mean, actually kill him. It started as a joke. Two women in a coffee shop talking about their ex-disasters. And when Carlton's name came up, the pain was so searing, so literal across my chest, I checked my stomach to see if someone had sliced me open with a knife.

That's when I told my best friend, Heather, I wanted to kill him.

"I'll hide the body," she said, taking a demure little sip from her cappuccino. And we both giggled like schoolgirls. But then she did something she's never done before. She put her hand on my shoulder and shot me a look. It was one of those pitying looks. The type of look a person gives a wounded dog before the vet puts him down. She even crinkled her eyes and said, "Be strong, Maddy."

And that's when I knew I was serious about killing him.

An hour later, after Heather and I parted company, I found myself browsing the gardening section of Half Price Books. I was looking for a book on poisons. And I didn't want to pay retail.

I felt angry. Angry as a tornado. Wild and swerving and unpredictable. For some reason, maybe anxiety, my eye had begun to

twitch. I rubbed my eyelid and skulked up and down the bookstore aisles.

The book I plucked from the shelf had a picture of a rat on the cover. I imagined Carlton's face attached to the rat's body. And then, for a split second, I imagined Carlton's *real* body, and us having sex on the kitchen floor, like we always used to do.

Another wave of anger swept over me and I shook my head back and forth, trying to erase the image from my mind. I was an assassin on a mission, after all.

I flipped open the rat book and began browsing through the pages.

Chapter 4: How to Exterminate those Pesky Pests.

"Making your own poison: The organic alternative," I read quietly to myself.

Am I really going to kill my ex? I thought. I blushed and glanced suspiciously up and down the bookstore aisles, as if half expecting a bunch of FBI guys to burst in and arrest me for Intent to Kill with Lavender-Scented Mouse Repellent.

I strolled to the register, casually, book tucked neatly under my arm.

"Cash or charge?" the longhaired clerk asked. He stroked his goatee and peered across the counter at me. I could smell the pungent scent of marijuana emanating from his clothes—particularly the hydroponic "kind-bud" variety preferred by the closet intelligentsia crowd of East Austin.

I winked at Mr. Greenleaf and slid a twenty across the counter. I'd seen enough movies to know I'd definitely be paying cash.

The first rule of killing an ex-fiancé: never leave a paper trail.

Chapter 2

The problem was, he was beautiful. When we moved in together, I'd watch Carlton slide open the kitchen window, place an ashtray on the sill, light his cigarette and let it drop to the side of his lips. He moved with a profound grace. And when he smiled at me—that sexy, sideways smile—my thoughts dropped away and everything I was became available to him. He's one of those men I would've jumped in front of a Greyhound bus for. And he made me believe he'd jump for me, too.

We met in graduate school at one of those young professionals happy-hour events. It was designed to be a casual meet-and-greet affair. A bunch of MBA students wearing jeans and nametags and drinking beer out of plastic cups.

Not surprisingly, it was held at an Irish pub. But not the real kind of Irish pub with plucky, fat-cheeked Irish people singing their lilting up-and-down songs, and dirty floors and the smell of stale beer. It was one of those newfangled Irish pubs. The ones with all the junk tacked up on the wall. Like street signs that say Sheperd's Pie Avenue. You know which kind of fake Irish pub I'm talking about. The kind that serves nachos.

I spotted him immediately. Shirt cuffs rolled up to his elbows. One leg dangling casually off a barstool. He had a certain movie

star quality. A certain fluidity. The way he moved his hands as he spoke. The way he smiled that confident, sideways smile.

He was lounging at a cocktail table with another guy and neither of them wore nametags. I suddenly wished I hadn't plastered my own white sticker against my chest. And written MADELINE PIATRO in large, bold letters.

At the sign-in table, I apparently went to town with the black magic marker. I even put two exclamation points at the end of my name. So my tag read MADELINE PIATRO!!—as if I was excited about the notion of myself.

So, here I was. Wearing jeans and loafers. With a big, fat name-tag affixed to my shirt. I mean, what a dork, right? I may as well have been wearing a pocket protector and a retainer.

So I stared across the bar at Movie Star Guy. And he must've felt my eyes boring into him because he looked straight at me and winked.

I remember blushing. A woman of my age. Blushing like a teenager. I glanced down at my loafers, took a deep breath and thought, "What the heck . . ."

And that's when I did it.

I, feeling full of bravado—after all, I was an MBA student!—marched right up and introduced myself.

"Hi. I'm Madeline. Madeline Piatro," I said, pointing to my nametag. "In case you couldn't read the billboard."

He seemed momentarily stunned. A woman approaching a man from across an entire bar was still rare in this circle. We were at the University of Texas—not some ultra-liberal north-eastern school where the women weren't afraid of anything.

In Texas, the women still played a little coy. Cats on the prowl for unwitting husbands, if you will.

"I'm in your marketing class," I said, sticking out my sweaty palm. My motto, after all, had always been: *Leap Before You Look*.